Comparative Global Humanities Now

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Abstract

This essay proposes to energize the mission of the humanities by radically globalizing their subject matter and methods, taking inspiration from the world’s monumental archive of humanistic creativity over 5000 years of recorded experience. It advocates for Comparative Global Humanities as a crucial complement to the more presentist new humanities fields of medical, environmental, or public humanities. Comparative Global Humanities aims to be inclusively global in terms of subject matter and participants, conceptually comparative, and based on rigorous historical and philological research. A Global Humanities for the 21st century is no antiquarian endeavor, but a head-on response to the greatest challenges of our times: systemic racism, inequality, and fundamentalisms, which are rooted in the unresolved aftermath of wars, colonization, and violence, and use classical heritage for nationalist propaganda. To create more equal societies in the present we need to create more equality for other pasts – and learn from all they offer.

Keywords

new humanities fields – premodern worlds – comparative studies – global history – world literature

1 Humanities Crisis Transformations

The debate about the place of the humanities in the university is almost as old as the modern university itself. Constantly reinvigorated in times of economic uncertainty, the debate has taken on sharper contours with the recent prioritizing of STEM initiatives and relative decrease in student enrollments, faculty positions, and funding for humanistic disciplines.
In the new millennium voices of deep concern were prevalent until the mid-
2010s, as evident in the report on the state of the humanities at Harvard (“Map-
ning the Future,” 2013) or the report on the humanities and social sciences
from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (“The Heart of the Matter,”
2013). But over the past few years scholars have increasingly suggested that “The
Crisis” has merely been an artefact of warped statistics that fails to take into
account a variety of developments over the past half century.1 The economic
landfall of the COVID-19 crisis of 2020 and its predictable drastic austerity mea-
sures will doubtlessly bring real-world economic woes again front and center
in the humanities crisis debate. But rather than paralyzing us, the foreboding
of dire institutional shrinkage ahead should prompt us all the more urgently to
ask what kind of humanities we want and need now. Although often perceived
as part of the same conversation, debates about the humanities have come in
quite different shapes: as data-driven diagnostics, moral apologetics, hands-on
administrative advisory, or visionary manifestoes. They all have value, but it is
good to keep their divergent framing, and audience in mind.

One of the most enlightening recent interventions comes from the econom-
ist Dennis Ahlburg, who in The Changing Face of Higher Education: Is There
an International Crisis in the Humanities? surveys the “humanities crisis debate”
with the astonished anthropological gaze of the outsider. He finds it far too
moralistic, and lacking in data (despite projects like the “Humanities Indica-
tors”). His volume expands the often restrictive national debates into a global
conversation. He thus includes a dozen case studies on the state of the human-
ities in countries ranging from Australia and South Africa, to Israel, Egypt and
Japan. To devise this as a balanced experiment with comparable outcomes,
Ahlburg asked each contributor to respond to the same set of questions. Aus-
tralia or Mexico face apparently no crisis, while in Egypt humanities enrollment
have substantially increased, due to the overall rise of university enrollments,
and the feminization of the student population (Assaad and Abdalla 2019). But
even behind a “no crisis” diagnosis or rising enrollments great challenges
may lurk, especially in poorer countries with young and underfunded educa-
tion systems: in Brazil the main purpose of a humanities college education is
the professional training of teachers for primary and secondary schools, with
hardly any research mission (Campello and Prandini Assis).2

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1 Greteman; and Mandler “Humanities Crisis?” and “The Rise of the Humanities.”
2 The Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, the International Council of Philos-
ophy and the Human Sciences (cipsh), and the unesco are currently compiling a “World
Humanities Report” which promises to give us a detailed insight into the global landscape of
the humanities and recommendations for action (World Humanities Report).
How can we assess the current global landscape of the humanities? Though only a limited perspective, we can gather intriguing answers from the “Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes.” Leafing through the webpages of the 250+ participating centers around the world, a few intriguing conclusions emerge. First, and least surprisingly, the bulk of humanities centers are located in North America or Europe, with only few such institutions in the Middle East or Africa. Affluence and educational opportunity are directly correlated with the presence of a higher education system that can afford to create humanities centers. This network gives scholars in the US and Europe the chance – and duty – to reach out to institutions and colleagues beyond the West struggling to build up basic institutions for humanities education. Second, from the webpages we can get quite a clear picture of new humanities fields that have emerged over the past decade, in particular the medical, environmental, public/applied, and digital humanities. Despite their different focus and subject matter, they have one commonality: the immediacy of literal, obvious relevancy and urgency, which the raging of the COVID-19 pandemic, of wildfires in California or Australia, and the dramatic data-expansion of our daily lives drive home by the day. We have clearly gone from a rhetoric of “crisis” (as embodied still in Bérube and Nelson of 1995) to the recent rhetoric of transformation and opportunity (Most, Ahlburg, Sörlin).

The shift in rhetoric and the public promotion of a handful of “new” humanities fields mark a new era for the humanities. Yet, a problematic commonality of these fields is that they focus on contemporary issues or a contemporary lens on particular topics. Where are new paradigms for the core humanities disciplines that work historically and philologically? This relates to a second concern, namely the blurred line between knowledge production and knowledge dissemination. There is no question that the humanities are theoretically uniquely well positioned “to build new national narratives, revive family life, restore community bonds, and shared moral culture,” in the worlds of David Brooks in the International New York Times a few years ago (Brooks 19). They can do so in a sort of “influencer” role, where humanists use their knowledge and persuasive power to facilitate debates about social problems and help craft consensus over potential solutions. But, as academic fields, the humanities are first and foremost a form of knowledge production and our most urgent task is to ensure they can actually, in this era of retrenchment, reproduce themselves with a critical mass of competent scholars in order to produce new knowledge. If we place knowledge dissemination over knowledge production, we shortcut the real mission and power of humanistic inquiry.

The fierce debate about the actual “value” of the humanities has pushed humanists onto the defensive and the humanities into ancillary roles: litera-
ture departments often feel underappreciated as “service” units teaching languages to physicists or engineers – as future global actors. Also, the standard rhetoric of the humanities’ power to hone students’ “critical and analytical abilities,” “eloquent writing,” or “communicative fluency” captures part of the importance of the humanities for fostering democratic values and civil societies. But we should not limit them to their toolbox. Nor are they reducible to our advocacy for literally urgent topics such as climate change or pandemics, although it helps us cope with our very legitimate existential Angst about the imminent future of humanity and our planet. Only the combination of these ancillary public roles with the production of new knowledge can give the humanities sustainable relevance and the sovereignty needed to put it to use for the greater good. Therefore, arguments for the value of the humanities that emphasize their specific ways of producing new knowledge seem to me most promising: take for example Rens Bod’s demonstrations of the practical contributions of humanistic studies in A New History of the Humanities. The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present (2013); or Rita Felski’s reminder of how the humanities “curate,” “convey,” and “compose” culture, which highlights the creative processes of knowledge transmission and production (2016).

This leaves us with the elemental questions: how can we ask the right questions that produce bold new knowledge in the humanities today? What kind of new methodologies will emerge from this? And how can we relate historical research to urgent questions of our moment? In this essay I propose to energize the mission of the humanities by radically expanding and deepening their subject matter and methods, taking inspiration from the world’s monumental archive of humanistic creativity over 5000 years of recorded experience. I advocate for Comparative Global Humanities as a crucial complement to the presentism of the new fields of medical, environmental, or public humanities. Comparative Global Humanities aims to be inclusively global in terms of subject matter and participants, conceptually comparative, and based on rigorous historical and philological research. I articulate this vision from the local angle of my personal experience as a scholar of classical East Asian literatures born and raised in Germany and now employed in the US. I study premodern Chinese, Japanese, and Korean literatures, which puts me at a quite particular angle towards the bulk of humanities research in the West focused on Europe and its global colonial and postcolonial footprint. East Asia is not just home to some of the world’s oldest continuous textual cultures, harking back more than three millennia in the case of China, its central “reference culture,” but today also home to several of the most powerful world economies, and a global export hub of highly successful pop music and media culture. As one of the world’s
only areas never pervasively colonized by Europeans, but that had its own modern, Western-style colonizer – Japan – East Asian countries have managed to adapt their own cultural traditions and build globally competitive education systems more than any other part of the non-Western world. Scholars in this region are thus economically, culturally, and institutionally in a unique position to “talk back” to the West and assert their own place in humanistic research. This will undoubtedly further increase with the remarkably more successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, China, and Japan. With their success in drastically reducing loss of life while also keeping the economy and national education running – all in sharp contrast to the US – East Asian states are the global winners of the pandemic crisis, not the least in terms of moral capital. While the methods of containment might be controversial in some cases, the governments’ ability to prevent massive loss of life undeniably carries moral weight, on top of the political and economic gains. Thinking not just about East Asia, as one macroregion of the world, but through East Asia, will thus become increasingly common on a global stage – including all the challenges of the new Sinocentrism. Even critics of the “Asian Century” euphoria, like Michael Auslin in The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World’s Most Dynamic Region, see this transformative power in the region. In this emerging new world order, we need to take seriously the different historical experience and cultural orientations that have made the East Asian states what they are today. Their “successful” modernization and economic power, which dominate the news, is only a small part of the story that needs to be told about this macro-region with globally still quite untapped stores of historical experience and cultural repertoires. Thus my personal experience as a scholar of East Asia represents not just the voice of a peripheral area specialist, but can serve as a minuscule seismograph of emerging landslide changes in global consciousness.

2 How to Go Global? The Promise and Limits of Globalizing Disciplines

For the world-minded person there is currently no shortage of paradigms with global ambitions: “world history” and “global history,” “world literature,” and “comparative philosophy” or “global philosophy,” to name just a few. Despite their considerable differences in age and pedigree, degree of institutionalization, and current impact, they all share at least three characteristics: the ambition to go global, a basic commitment to existing disciplinarity, and the relative lack of interest in substantially engaging with other global “world” paradigms.
developing in disciplines next door. How “global” are our “global” paradigms today? And how do their paths of getting there compare?

Let’s indulge for a moment in a broad-brushed contrastive sketch. “World History” is arguably the venerable ancestor of global paradigms. Ultimately rooted in the “universal” histories of Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe, it has gained considerable institutional infrastructure since the 1980s, with programs, journals and professional associations. Its age and pedigree and the often big-sweep gestures of imperial ambition evident in popular books on “world history” keep suspicions of eurocentrism alive. The most protean new trend in historical studies is “Global History,” which started its meteoric rise around the turn of the millennium.\(^3\) Unlike World History, it is less a subdiscipline of history than a particular way of doing history, a welcome symptom of the globalization of the discipline of history as a whole. As C.A. Bayly noted (using the older concept of “world history” to also capture the new trend of “global history”): “All historians are world historians now, though many have not yet realized it.” (Bayly 2004, 469) The discipline of history has been particularly productive in spawning recent globalizing approaches – histoire croisée or entangled history, maritime history, global histories of empire etc. They often share an attractive tension between the local and the global. Unlike the sweeping gestures of popular world history, popular global history publications typically zoom in on palpable and traceable objects and dwell on microhistorical manifestations of global processes. Consider the delicious volumes the publisher Reaktion Books has been churning out in past years such as *Sugar: A Global History*, or *Barbecue: A Global History*!

Various forms of global history are poised to change the face of the discipline of history tout court. Particularly promising are approaches like Dominic Sachsenmaier’s (2011), who shows how little really “global” “global history” actually is today. Demonstrating substantial differences of this field in the US, Germany, and China he reminds us of the blatant inequalities in the global study of history and the responsibility of Western scholars to make sure that we develop a truly global “Global History” field, where not just Western scholars have the privilege of authoring new theoretical paradigms.

Consider, in contrast, the discipline of philosophy. On May 11 of 2016 Bryan van Norden, a scholar of Chinese philosophy, and his colleague Jay Garfield published an opinion piece in “The Stone” column of *The New York Times* that gave philosophy colleagues an ultimatum: “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is.” Both argued with bitter stridency for opening philos-

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3 Akira Iriye traces the emergence of global history since the 1990s in relation to the subfields of diplomatic history, international history, and transnational history (Iriye Chapter 1).
Ophy departments to non-Western thought traditions. Within a single day the column received 800 comments, many filled with vitriolic hostility. One reader commented that Confucius “might have had some good philosophical ideas, [but] China never produced a tradition of argument and commentary following his work, and so there was no real philosophical tradition in China.” (van Norden, xiii). This inspired van Norden to fight back with even greater vehemence in Taking Back Philosophy. A Multicultural Manifesto (2017). To say that the globalizing of philosophy has suddenly become a “hot topic” is a drastic understatement. I am not aware of any comparably ugly and violent debate around the topic of the globalization of disciplines in any other humanities discipline. Compare, for civility, Richard Drayton and David Motadel’s “The Futures of Global History” (2018), a thoughtful response to critics of global history and spirited argument for its value. Given that only very few philosophy departments in the US have been hiring scholars working on philosophical traditions beyond the West, philosophy is currently unquestionably the discipline that is most resistant to diversifying its intellectual scope, faculty, and curriculum.

Next to global history, “World Literature” has institutionalized itself most rapidly over the past decade as a global paradigm. Though bearing an old association with Goethe and 19th-century forms of European cosmopolitanism, it has experienced a rapid new-world incarnation over the past decade, particularly in the US, in the form of new “world literature” departments, David Damrosch’s remarkable Harvard-based Institute for World Literature (IWL), a new flagship journal (Journal of World Literature), and also three multi-volume world literature anthologies (Norton, Longman, Bedford) used by tens of thousands of students every year in newly invigorated liberal arts curricula.

The World Literature paradigm has had a formidable career, both in terms of its resounding success and the vivid debates sparked by its critics, such as Emily Apter in her Against World Literature. Its most prominent guiding spirit, David Damrosch, is a model of worldliness. He sparked decisive debates with his pioneering What is World Literature? (2003) through sparkling analyses of subjects ranging from Gilgamesh, medieval German female mystics, to Egyptian and Aztec poetry. But the majority of scholarship and theorizing of “world literature” today focuses on the modern and contemporary periods with a few exceptions, most notably Alexander Beecroft’s An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day (2015). The temporal flattening of world lit-

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4 These two frontrunners of global humanistic paradigms have been engaging in a compelling dialogue, as evident in May Hawas’s recent Routledge Companion to World Literature and World History.
erature debates towards the modern and contemporary limits the paradigm’s scope, both thematically and methodologically. We miss out on what classical Indian epic, East Asian court poetry, or Roman novels can bring to the study of “world literature.” More worrisomely, the focus on the modern and contemporary periods risks limiting research topics largely to stories of reception, and predominantly to colonial and postcolonial contexts. Yet, if world literature in modernity is easy because cultures are connected, how do we deal with the disconnected cultures preceding modernity? That is, how do we learn to compare them? The study of world literature, understood in planetary *longue durée* as Damrosch conceived and modeled it, requires us to more explicitly engage with the millennia-crossing bulk of the world’s textual cultures before the short span of a century or so that most world literature studies focus on.

Here a new paradigm-in-the-making could productively complement both global history, with its focus on interconnections and reception phenomena, and world literature studies, with its strong orientation towards the modern: let’s call it for now, in bland descriptive terms, “comparative global (premodern) humanities.” Philologists in particular of the various ancient and medieval worlds have pushed for comparisons of the distinctive cultural traditions that preceded the pervasive impact of Western colonization. Labels vary: “Boston University Comparative Studies of the Premodern World Initiative,” “Global Medieval Studies Program” (University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana), “Archaia (Yale Initiative for the Study of Antiquity and the Premodern World),” “Premodern World Initiative” (University of Minnesota) or “Global Premodernities Project” (University of Washington), to name a few recent initiatives. Though still without a unified label, “premodernists” – of East and South Asia, the Near East and Africa, Europe, the Pre-Columbian Americas – recognize a shared mission. There is currently a palpable excitement about suddenly discovering so many overlapping intellectual passions and pedagogical interests. This sense of community gives common purpose, as premodern fields in all disciplines are hardest hit by the humanities crisis.

Comparative Global (Premodern) Humanities? What flesh can we put to this bony string of abstractions?

“Comparative”: this emerging movement vitally depends on developing a richer array of methodologies of comparatism, because it targets cultures before the pervasive impact of European colonization and the large-scale “globalization” process this initiated.

Still, its geographic reach aims for a “Global,” meaning here “globe-spanning,” world scale (in a geographical sense of including the entire planet, rather than the temporal sense of targeting the trajectory of increasingly “global(izing)” cultures over the past centuries).
“Premodern” is in parenthesis: until ten years ago this term was a preferred way of scholars of non-Western cultures to point to the period of native development preceding Westernization. Some of my Europeanist friends sneered at it as a fuzzy, unproductive concept. It is indeed a fuzzy temporal marker: even for cultures within the same macroregion its date range can greatly vary. Functionally, Chinese “modernity,” as defined by the spread of print culture, emergence of commercial culture and social classes of its consumers, and historical self-consciousness towards earlier periods, can be dated back to the Song Dynasty (960–1279), whereas, with variations, the “early modern” begins in Korea arguably in the fifteenth and in Japan in the seventeenth century. Thanks to this functional definition scholars now talk comfortably about “early modern East Asia,” as an implicit comparandum to “early modern Europe.” But in terms of the defining force of native traditions and their grip on society, East Asia’s “premodernity” reaches into the 20th century, and its end is associated with the demise of the Chinese tribute system, the death of Literary Chinese as the region’s lingua franca, and the waning and contestation of traditional forms of writing, governing, believing, and living. But even more problematically, “premodern” is too subservient to the master narrative of modernity and its strawman “tradition” or “native convention.” For a movement that aims to bring the full span of the world’s past 5000 millennia of recorded historical experience bear on our present and future, it is seriously limiting in its subordination to the concept of “modernity.”

“Humanities”: we have yet to fully appreciate the fact that the currently most successful “global” paradigms are all associated with extant humanities disciplines. World Literature, World History and Global History, Comparative Philosophy, to name a few, are all cued to strongly disciplinary environments and their different conceptual and methodological repertoires. Thus, the “globalization” of the humanities proceeds in surprisingly parochial fashion. This has many advantages. Disciplinary global paradigms, however self-critical, do not fundamentally question the boundaries of our 19th century, outmoded divisions into “literature,” “philosophy,” “history,” or “religion.” They already have their pre-existing institutional stages, academic audience, and a full disciplinary apparatus of associations, journals, and job search venues ready to accept new ideas pitched along these extant structures. This promises quicker success, in contrast to Comparative Global Humanities initiatives which will have to struggle through differences in disciplinary best practices, terminology, and methodology.

This is a monumental challenge, because a postcolonial literary theorist, a philologically-minded historian, or an ecumenical world religion scholar might share little conceptual vocabulary and few methodological assumptions. Yet,
this “disadvantage” of disciplinary breaks and interdisciplinary gaps carries enormous intellectual potential, for much more ground-breaking innovation than any of the disciplinary global paradigms can ever achieve alone. Comparative Global Humanities, or whatever we want to call it, will need to go a longer way and build more bridges in the process, through potentially quite recalcitrant dialogues, but to potentially much greater intellectual effect. It could become a major vector in the global transformation of the humanities thanks to – and not despite! – its area-studies virtues: scholars with deep philological and cultural area expertise and a naturally engrained transdisciplinarity – connecting intuitively the study of phenomena that modern academia keeps distinct as “history,” “literature,” “philosophy,” “religious studies” or “art history.” Note here that “transdisciplinarity” is different from still discipline-focused, and often quite selective, “interdisciplinarity.” It is not without irony that area studies, a favorite target of post-war criticism seen as complicit with Cold War politics, could structurally enable a greater innovation potential.

3 “Comparative Global Humanities”

3.1 Globalize Classics!
Among the new initiatives projects on the “Ancient World” are strikingly prominent. The NYU-affiliated Institute for the Study of the Ancient World is to date probably the largest such enterprise. But numerous other initiatives have sprung up: Stanford University’s “Ancient Chinese and Mediterranean Empires Comparative History Project”; McGill’s and Northwestern University’s “Global Antiquities” initiatives; Chinese University of Hong Kong’s “Center for the Comparative Study of Antiquity”; or also summer schools like the “Globalizing Classics” summer course symposium at Humboldt University in 2015. Despite their reference to the “global” these initiatives tend to focus, narrowly, on comparisons of Greco-Roman (plus perhaps Near Eastern) antiquity and China, mapping onto the world’s current economic powerhouses and the political metageography of our historical moment. Also, some of these initiatives are limited to particular disciplines, such as archeology or institutional history. To my knowledge there is currently no initiative that we could actually call “global” and that aims to really be global by creating new comparative methodologies through a holistic transdisciplinary humanistic perspective.

I believe that this is what we need: a collaborative initiative that is inclusively global, conceptually comparative, and based on rigorous historical and philological research. Growing this out of a focus on Antiquity has its advantages. This is the period when formative cultural orientations and genealogies
of cultural knowledge and practices developed that enable particularly productive cross-cultural comparisons. Second, “Classics” as a Western field of study, is, proverbially, “the oldest area studies field,” with a strongly transdisciplinary perspective. Also, today, antiquity is the period that is most often instrumentalized politically for populist collective identity formation and nation branding, which imposes an ethical imperative on “classicists” around the world to speak out against such abuses, wherever this happens, in India, China, Israel or Hungary.

We have a long way to go. Although any culture of longer historical standing has its own share of “classical periods” or “classical texts,” “classicists” are not created equal. The unqualified label “Classics” still only applies to the Western European Greco-Roman heritage and its study. At least four types of glass ceilings hinder the globalization of “Classics.”

− Our reluctance to let go of the cultural capital that comes with the universalization of the Greco-Roman tradition as “Classics” par excellence, and, in Europe or North America, the natural local attachment to that tradition as “ours,” despite increasing demographic diversity.

− The international authority that western Classicists enjoy in contrast to the often more locally limited agency of classicists in non-Western countries.

− Relatedly, the ideological, often nationalist, pressures to which classicists outside of the West are subjected in their native countries; or the discrimination, sometimes even violent threats, directed at Westerners who study the history of cultures beyond Europe, which non-Western populist, nationalist countries claim today as their own alone.

− Intriguingly, the marginalization of the postclassical Latin, and the Eastern Greek/Byzantine classical, heritage within Western “Classics.”

Nobody would want to deny that classical periods, values, canons, and classical studies existed outside of Europe. But Western Classics scholars have faced a formidable challenge in seeing their field drastically shrink over the past century from a royal discipline embodying the universal foundations of general education and moral edification, to a waning field among many devoted to the study of one particular – even if still particularly hegemonic – region. Addressing this cognitive quantum leap from universality to problematically universalized particularity requires much time, shared intellectual effort, and mutual thoughtfulness.

In the meantime, scholars of their native classical traditions beyond the West have not just lacked international status as “classicists” but often face ideological pressures at home. Take the case of East Asia, where since the turn of the twentieth century the rise of nationalisms and “national studies” (國學; in particular in the patriotic fields of literature and history) have made
scholars of classical traditions and archeologists into important players in the creation of collective identity and global nation branding. Typically, they do not have an international status as the interpreters of the world's foundational civilizations. And scholars of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese classical traditions working in their native countries are inevitably agents constrained by the limits of “national studies.”

Consider this: a Chinese scholar of Chinese classical literature sits at the heart of the national paradigm and can speak on a national stage; but a Japanese scholar of Japanese literature written in Literary Chinese, Japan’s dominant language of government, elite education, Buddhism, and belles lettres from the eighth through the twentieth centuries, is marginalized in “national literature studies,” which centers around a vernacular Japanese canon created around the turn of the twentieth century in the midst of Japanese empire-building – symbolized by the grand vernacular novel *The Tale of Genji*, written by the eleventh-century court lady Murasaki Shikibu. The deep nationalism of classical studies in the East Asian countries stands in stark contrast to the largely “transnational” discipline of (Western) “Classics” since Hellenistic times, or at least the Renaissance. True, we see different schools and academic styles in Germany, Italy, or Greece, and more differences even within these national traditions. Still, no one nation can claim “Classics” as their national monopoly. In the PRC, research on Chinese culture by foreigners and scholars working outside of China is lumped together as “Overseas Chinese Studies” (*haiwai hanxue* 海外漢學), as distinct from Chinese national studies. Needless to say, there is no such thing as “Overseas Greek Studies;” today’s Hellenic Republic is not the center for the study of Ancient Greece, nor do scholars around the world have to publish in modern Greek to be heard and respected. Yet, research on the classical literatures of China, Japan, or Korea happens overwhelmingly in their respective national languages and national literature departments and research of premodern East Asia in the region is severely hampered by debilitating language barriers, as the more senior generation of scholars have typically very little knowledge of other East Asian languages or the new *lingua franca* that is gradually replacing the now dead Literary Chinese: Global English.

But even Western classicists are not created equal. Renaissance and Baroque writers applied Hesiod’s and Ovid’s decline model of four ages of the world – golden, silver, bronze, iron – to the history of literature (Ax). Until recently studying “silver-age,” post-Augustan Latinity, was considered second best at best. By now Late Antiquity has been enthusiastically rediscovered, as a new golden age of sorts blending excitingly into the Medieval. But it seems unlikely that Medieval Latin and Neo-Latin Studies will ever play a central role in...
either Classics or national literature departments. Ernst Robert Curtius’s grand
dream of understanding European literatures through their shared Latin roots
is unlikely to be realized unless European national literature departments hire
more faculty with serviceable Latin skills, relevant cultural historical knowl-
edge, and a fresh, cosmopolitan and de-nationalized mindset. As an offspring
of the Latin West the field of Classics has had little incentive to grant Byzan-
tine studies a proper place in the master narrative of Western civilization. The
cliché of a gulf between Europe’s West and East has been further enhanced by
centuries of Ottoman rule over Greece, negative images of the “Balkans” as a
region of irrational ethnic strife, orthodox Christianity, the iron curtain, and
its aftermath in post-socialist Southeastern Europe, plus Greece’s image of an
economic problem child in the European Union.

How can we reshape the grossly uneven landscape of “classical studies,” here
just briefly sketched for the East Asia and the West? A landscape deformed
by inequality, neocolonial and nationalist ideologies, political pressures, and,
often unconsciously, culturalist pride? I believe we need to both globalize “Clas-
sics” and localize it. “Classics” has to become “classical studies” of the world’s
civilizations, not just of Greco-Roman antiquity. This will allow our concepts of
the classical – its canons, values, periods, people, works, uses in the present –
to drastically diversify. Opening the door to transforming “Classics” into global-
ized “classical studies” is a comparatively easy act for Western academics: it only
requires some generosity and curiosity. But scholars working in regions that tap
native traditions to fuel nationalism or religious extremism, such as in parts
of Asia and the Middle East, are likely to be severely limited in their freedom
to “globalize” classics, torn between the historical record and their academic
integrity, and threatened by ideological demands and political repression. This
shows the urgent need to also “localize” classical studies: “localizing” classical
studies requires us to understand the specific pressures and actual dangers clas-
sical scholars face in particular regions of the world.

Ironically, the de-politicization of Western “Classics” has contributed to its
wanning importance in the 20th century. If it weren’t for the tragic effects of
ideological pressures and fears of political repression, Western classicists might
even envy the degree of center-stage “relevancy” of classical studies in the daily
life and politics of nationalist states with resolute nativist interest groups. Think
of India’s successful attempt to have June 21 declared International Yoga Day by
the UN (where is Roman wrestling on the UN agenda?). “Localizing classics” for
Western Classicists of the Greco-Roman world means to re-understand classi-
cal studies as a deeply political responsibility. We need to be awake to the living
uses and abuses of classical traditions and studies around the world and gen-
erous and astute in supporting colleagues facing those challenges.
3.2 Dare to Compare!

“My befuddlement with comparison is primarily methodological and epistemological in nature. But I’m also befuddled by its stunted presence in our disciplinary discourses – the first of several conundrums I want to share here. […] the disquiet with comparison seems to be ubiquitous – it’s the crazy uncle in the attic you try not to talk about” (Pollock “Conundrums of Comparison” 273–274). Sheldon Pollock diagnoses a rampant “comparative deficit” and reflects on the challenges and benefits of pushing for new methodologies of comparison. In an earlier article he contrasts the systematic development of comparative methodology in the social sciences into a subdiscipline with an “unconcern with the theory of comparativism” in the humanities, in particular in comparative intellectual history and comparative literature (Pollock “Comparison Without Hegemony” 186 ff.). Disciplinary discussions of comparison have a long genealogy, emerging in more systematic form in the nineteenth century with new disciplines such as Comparative Linguistics and Comparative Literature. The classicist Walter Scheidel is equally stunned by “comparative deficit” in historical studies: “In the study of History, comparative analysis remains rare. Explicit reflection on the uses, methodology and problems of historical comparison is rarer still. In this respect, the divide between History as an academic discipline that has at least occasionally been counted among the Social Sciences and fields such as Economics, Political Science and Sociology is as wide as it can be.” (Scheidel 40). With long-standing debates on cultural comparison originating with Johann Gottfried Herder, Madame de Staël, or the Transylvanian scholar Hugó Meltzl of Lomnitz, a founding figure of Comparative Literature in the 1870s; with the recent notable increase of edited volumes juxtaposing case studies drawn from different parts of the world on anything from court culture, foreign encounters, and travelogues to “world philology,” history of the book, or history of science; and with comparative data analysis being daily business in the social sciences – why do especially scholars of premodern cultures diagnose a “comparative deficit”? Even despite prominent recent publications explicitly devoted to comparison, such as a special issue on comparison in New Literary History (2009, no. 40.3) or Rita Felski’s and Susan S. Friedman’s influential Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses (2013)?

One reason is the conceptual fuzziness of “comparison.” It is actually a complex of various, at times only vaguely related, practices rather than a concept, and it treacherously glosses over a variety of widely divergent approaches under the same umbrella term.

As a basic cognitive faculty that triggers the forming of judgements based on the juxtaposition of at least two things, the breathtaking semantic breadth
of “comparison” reaches from the myriad “comparative” activities that guide our daily lives, such as comparison of prices for goods and services, of neighbors, or of siblings, to academic forms of “comparisons,” based on, typically, statistics for the quantitative social sciences or qualitative comparanda for the interpretive humanities. “Comparisons” can be vertical – juxtaposing phenomena from the same tradition, for example comparing the readership of novels in eighteenth- with those of twentieth-century England; or it can be horizontal, in, very roughly, two ways: first, comparing for example twenty-first-century British novels with anglophone novels by various postcolonial writers in Africa or Asia. Or comparing archaic Greek poetry with the ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry (ca. 600 BCE). These two horizontal types of comparisons are actually radically different forms of “comparison” that require a different methodological repertoire. Of the first type are comparisons with shared historical genealogies that are thus a form of reception studies or studies of transcultural exchanges, as we now prefer to say to more equitably highlight mutual engagement in the process. The overwhelming majority of comparative studies in the humanities practices actually this form of “comparison,” within traditions or across traditions related in time and space. Our own visceral experience of globalization and mindset of glocal connectedness, via the internet, fair trade products or local organic food, makes us revel in maritime networks, trade routes, and in processes of diaspora, translation, and transculturation. These are all current areas of vibrant interest creating empowering new insights and, in the case of research on premodern periods, uncovering patterns of global interconnectedness before our own “Global Age” proper. We naturally pay attention to stories of cultural reception and transcultural interaction. “Global Studies,” the study of transnational phenomena in particular from an economic, political, sociological, and institutional perspective, has been the trendsetter in research about globalization, but it is no coincidence, that otherwise comparison-critical historians spearheaded “Global History” parallel to the rise of Global Studies. This tacit kinship between Global Studies and Global History is plainly visible in recent reference works like The Oxford Handbook of Global Studies (2019), which admits only one of the core humanities disciplines into their purview: History. Needless to say, the kinship between studies of globalization and Global History risks to anachronistically project connectivity optimism onto earlier periods in history.

But in their diagnosis of a comparative deficit Pollock and Scheidel are not talking about either the vertical or the first – genealogical – horizontal type of comparatism. They point here to methodologies of comparison of the second horizontal type: the comparative juxtaposition of cultural production in historically unrelated cultures. It is precisely the lack of connectivity that
requires a different comparatist tool set – although it is, ironically, twenty-first-century globalization that enables us to research the previous lack of connection between cultures.

3.3 What Travels, and What Doesn’t, and Why? The Trouble with the Non-Genealogical

We can restrain our connectivity optimism and construe globalization as a gradual, yet relentlessly inevitable densening of connective networks over the past centuries or millennia, or even show the downsides of connectivity, blantly visible with the COVID-19 pandemic (Gänger & Osterhammel). But it is terribly difficult to unthink globalization and “switch off” this most subcutaneous catalyst of our quotidian experience and mindset. “Reception” or “transculturation” has become our cognitive default. It is hard to imagine that things might not travel. But different things have always travelled in different ways, and overall, much less so before the nineteenth century. Take “silk” versus “canonical poetry.” Silk travelled from China across Eurasia to places of voracious demand. The Roman Senate issued several edicts banning Chinese silk (or, as Tacitus relates, in 14 CE the wearing of silk clothing by males) to avoid trade imbalances. For men it was considered effeminate and “oriental”; and it was shunned as being too transparent and sensual on the pious bodies of Roman women. Silk traveled mostly through small local networks whose traders would move within the region (Hansen), but its high demand made it a “global item” already in antiquity.

But what about elite poetry, a comparably highly prized good? Take for example the China’s Classic of Poetry, or Virgil’s Aeneid. The first complete translations of the Classic of Poetry into Western languages date to the nineteenth century and the first complete Chinese translation of the Aeneid, first attempted in 1930, was only published in 1984 (Liu)! Despite its towering status in its respective cultures, canonical poetry often hardly travelled beyond the immediate cultural sphere, where it was canonized as part of the educational curriculum, in the case of Rome, the Hellenistic and Roman empires, and for China, the Sinographic Sphere of East Asia. We might attribute the difference in “connectivity” between China and Rome/Europe, by a few millennia, to the difference between travelling “objects” versus “texts.” But things can get far more complicated when we even just focus on texts. Prose tales and fiction, such as the Jātaka Tales about the Buddha, or epic romances about Alexander the Great spread widely across the Eurasian continent, passing through multiple languages and cultures; Buddha tales even inspired the many versions of Barlaam and Josaphat, a widely popular story of a pious prince that was adapted to different religious milieus as it reached the Middle East and Europe. Protago-
nists, plot elements, and didactic purpose took new shapes on their way across the continent. Silk, ritual vessels, religious statues or beliefs, ideologies, governance techniques, popular literature, court poetry, and lastly, books – as the material object can obviously travel independently of its content – all travelled at different speed and on different grounds and conditions.

So here is a false paradox: do we need to treat Buddhist popular tales, where plot is much more mobile than the precise diction and meter of elite poetry, along a “reception” vector, but canonical poetry along a “comparative vector”? That seems intuitively wrong. Is the disjunction between mobility and high status in the textual/genre hierarchy culturally specific? If so, what does that imply for cultural transfer in particular across script and cosmopolitan language boundaries? When and why is “pop culture” necessarily the more mobile traveler than elite traditions? Where, what, and how is the “transition” between genealogical and purely “connectionless” comparisons?

These are some of the exciting questions that deserve our attention and the development of new methodologies. The comparative deficit is all the more dire, because non-genealogical comparisons have a bad reputation for being either unproductive or hegemonic. An older variant, in East-West comparisons since the nineteenth century has been assumption of an “ellipsis” (Denecke 12–13) the juxtaposition of cultures that results in detecting what the other is “missing” (the scientific revolution? Epic poetry? Concepts of truth and metaphysics? Potatoes?). This is definitely “comparison with hegemony” (to echo Sheldon Pollock’s “Comparison Without Hegemony”), an ignominiously imperialistic version of comparatism. Kinder versions of this approach attempt to somehow identify X (Human rights? Philosophy? Technology?) in all cultures to ensure that all people on earth have equal right to produce such cultural capital from their own histories. As much as we can morally appreciate the Samaritan impulse in these ecumenical versions of comparatism, it creates no transformative new knowledge, especially because the very definitions of “Philosophy” or “Human Rights” are defined by universalizing Western concepts. Even worse, the Samaritan approach erases radical cultural differences that would need critical comparative, historical assessment if we want comparatism to produce historical and cultural knowledge rather than serve as a tool for global redemption and peace-making. “Everybody had it (or, tragically and regrettably not)” is nothing more than a slogan of comparative branding and mending of nations and their histories. We need comparisons that enable transformative insights about both sides of the comparison.

Short-cutting the search for new comparative methodologies by retreating into methodologically less challenging studies of transcultural interaction would conceptually impoverish the new global humanities. True, the focus
on transregional networks has increasingly brought to light the local agency of “peripheries,” that we should now not consider “peripheral” anymore. This is revisionary, valuable and has a powerful ethical imperative. But studying “reception” will always play out on a conceptually Western ground – whether of “Westernization” or the resistance against it. Limiting ourselves to the cozier parameters of studying reception eliminates the shock of facing radical alterity and “incomparability.” This is understandable. Isn’t it less daunting to study reception than to take the risk to devise never-perfectly-fitting and always-open-to-criticism comparisons? To study genealogical connections we typically need fewer languages (one can comfortably do “postcolonial theory” and “world literature” with serviceable English or French skills only), less competence in totally different cultural traditions or life experiences far from home, and can drastically reduce the anxiety over taking the intellectual quantum leap, not to say leap of faith, that any non-genealogical, horizontal comparative work demands.

Comparisons of premodern worlds might seem temporally less adjacent to contemporary issues. But methodologically the comparative study of these worlds promise to fulfill urgent epistemological and ethical imperatives for the present and future: we learn how to empathize differently (beyond the potentially paralyzing model of, despite all nuancing, perpetrators and victims in postcolonial studies), and how to cope with true alterity, confronting intellectual, religious, social, literary worlds that pique and unsettle our conceptual habits, allowing us to thoroughly globalize our approaches instead of short-circuiting them again and again through the colonial and post-colonial feedback loop of Western cultural parameters.

Comparison is rebellious and radical. It is ethically agnostic, or actually ambivalent, as it can be used as a tool for hegemonic control, but also as a grand, revisionary equalizer. We can tap its revisionary potential particularly through premodern worlds. This form of comparatism shares its ethical purpose with postcolonial studies, but accomplishes its goal through the lens of the pre-colonial. It opens our eyes to radically different cultural realities and truths that can help us to thoroughly “globalize” and thereby invigorate our current humanities disciplines.

3.4 Practice “Conceptual Worlding” and Metageographical Critique!

Opening the canon and archive of “world literature” has been a great achievement of world literature pedagogy over the past couple of decades, as traceable in the three largest anglophone world literature anthologies for college classroom use: The Norton Anthology of World Literature, The Longman Anthology of World Literature, and The Bedford Anthology of World Literature. In its first inca-
nation of The Norton Anthology of World Literature – The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces of 1956 – the Western canon was still dominant. Since the 1990s in particular the canon of what counts as “world literature” has greatly expanded, from, for East Asia, China and Japan to, finally by 2012, smaller East literatures, such as Korean, and Vietnamese. How can we balance the expansion of the globalizing canon from the world’s traditions with the desire to retain the strongest representation of beloved European classics? And how do we get from archival expansion – “more stuff” – to true conceptual cross-pollination and innovation – “new methods”?

Respecting and extending the right of all men and women to philosophy also supposes [...] the appropriation but also the surpassing of languages that [...] are called foundational or originary for philosophy, that is, the Greek, Latin, German, or Arabic languages. Philosophy should be practiced, according to paths that are not simply anamnesic, in languages that are without filiational relation with these roots.

Derrida

Derrida advocates here – at least in theory, though unfortunately never in his own practice – for a form of globalizing philosophy, where other languages and thought traditions serve as source for new kinds of philosophizing. And I agree that thinking new, living new, and promoting more global equality among countries, cultures, and communities requires other languages and worlds than Global English and Euro-americanism (or “postcolonial immigrant multiculturalism”). But with the pervasive impact of the West, is there even any language left “without filiational relation” to the originary languages of Western philosophy? Is there any space left where we can transcend anamnesis? How can we hope for conceptual innovation from languages that have long been without a genealogical relation to European languages and with their own strong thought traditions, but that have been thoroughly Westernized in modern times? Let’s consider again the case of East Asia. Much of the vocabulary of modern East Asian languages consists today of neologisms acquired since the 19th century through the translation of Western concepts: “philosophy,” “culture,” “society,” “university,” “democracy,” “nation,” “infection,” “cosmology” etc. Today native speakers don’t typically realize that 哲學 (Chinese: zhexue;
Japanese: *tetsugaku*; Korean: *ch’ŏrhak*; Vietnamese: *triệt học*) is a foreign term introduced more than a century ago to translate the Western concept and phenomenon of “philosophy.” Since this concept exists now as a nativized neologism in the modern East Asian languages, people project the Western idea of “philosophy” back onto their own history – imposing a radically foreign framework that severely warps their own traditions. Sadly, we cannot solve this problem with the best intentions and fiercest purpose of resistance to Eurocentrism. This is the force of history – of European and Japanese colonialism and Western economic and cultural hegemony since the nineteenth century – of history as it happened. And we cannot turn the clocks of history back.

But we can foster awareness of this linguistic “colonization” that hampers any attempt to write about the premodern past in modern Chinese, Japanese or Korean. We can aim to recover premodern non-Western “humanities,” knowledge cultures, such as the traditional world of letters and literature (*文*) in Japan and East Asia (Kôno, Denecke et al.). And we can embrace the reality as an invitation to experimenting with our ingrained conceptual biases in English. Consider this patchwork of sentences, with Western-inspired neologisms in italics. Over the past century China has acquired a “philosophy,” to stand on a par with Greece, the cradle of Western “civilization,” by declaring its masters, such as Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi “philosophers.” Some “Societies” in East Asia have been transformed into “Democracies” since the Second World War. East Asia is now dotted with “Universities” educating “the People” of their respective “Nations,” among other things in “National Literature” and “National History.” We constantly need to think against this “conceptual screen,” a formidable mosaic of glass ceilings of sorts when trying to understand, and speak or write about, traditional East Asia. Antonio Gramsci and subaltern studies have called attention to underprivileged social classes – colonial subjects, women, children – and promised liberation for individuals, groups, entire regions. Here we have a strangely internalized, disembodied form of the “subaltern”: it is not a person or territory, but the premodern past of non-Western cultures. To riff on Gayatri Spivak’s well-known article “Can the subaltern speak?”: “Can premodern China ‘speak’?” And how can we talk about it in any language, including modern Chinese, without colonizing its past – since it and we have lost our voice about it through drastic linguistic Westernization?

Here comes the inverse thought experiment, as ridiculous as tragic: imagine that Japan or China had colonized Europe aggressively over the past couple of centuries and that a large part of modern vocabulary of European languages now consisted of Chinese-inspired neologisms coined through translations of Chinese canonical and scholarly texts. Imagine now the platitudes that would appear in an imaginary “History of European philosophy” textbook, overlaid
with an East Asian conceptual screen, in our modern, now strongly Sinicized European languages. We might find clichés like this: “Plato was suspicious of shī 詩 and wen 文 and believed that it should not be part of the guō 國 of zhuzi baijia 諸子百家.” Understood? Stepping back from this counterfactual history experiment, we could put this simply as “Plato was suspicious of poetry (shī) and literature (wen) and believed that it should not be part of the republic (guō) of philosophers (zhuzi baijia).” First of all, appreciate the fact that with English at least today we hardly have to face the violent imposition of recent foreign neologisms! Next, consider the conceptual gaps: in Chinese shī and wen have often been understood to depict some truthful experience of the poet – not outright “fiction” or “mimesis” in the Platonic sense. This allowed for the peculiar existence of “poet-historians” like the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu, one of Chinese most canonical poets, who chronicled the upheavals of his time in verse. Yet, in the Platonic tradition “poetry” was an “artifact” (Greek “poiesis”), something so artificial and devoid of metaphysical truth that Plato banned it from his ideal state. And how could guō, a “state,” ever map on our pride seeking the roots of democracy in the Greek city states and the ideal of the “republic”? Equally alienatingly, Chinese zhuzi baijia, literally “Masters (Literature),” refers to various early thought traditions centered around charismatic master figures (such as Confucius, or Laozi). None of these philosophical masters were interested in developing a project of a “philosophy” searching for universal metaphysical truth, as at least the Platonic tradition (and European tradition, as the Whiteheadian “footnote” to Plato) pursued it. Even just this one sentence from an imaginary reverse-virtual-history textbook should make the enormity of this problem clear.

Imagine a well-educated late 19th-century government official of Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) who has slept through the twentieth century and awakens today. The drastic shift from Chinese characters to the hangul script would be the least of surprises. But how could he make sense of the conceptual screen of Western neologisms that now overlays every single sentence? What would he feel when trying to talk in this new gibberish – about “premodern” Korea, his Chosŏn-period Korea. Excitement? Tingling novelty? Revelation? Humiliation? Rivalry? Depression? Vengefulness? These sentiments have accompanied the engagement between East Asia and the West since the late nineteenth century. Of course, we can also get more cold-blooded and sober about this. Today, as neologisms have built not just new languages, but also new institutions, education systems, and new forms of politics, scholarship, science, pop culture, marriages and everyday lives, they seem little foreign and have their own historical raison d’être. Still, these problems are a systemic predicament for studying East Asia before the twentieth century, which needs to access the cultural space
preceding the colonization of East Asian languages and societies with Western ideas and ideologies. Every time I lay my hands on the keyboard to start writing another sentence for an article or a book I feel the heavy weight of this tantalizing predicament. And I know we can only win, now, by devising detours.

When we aim to also globalize our concepts and methods, we need to first cultivate a relentless awareness of the colonization of today’s East Asian (or South Asian, or African ...) languages with Western neologisms and concepts. And we need to apply this to even broader frames of reference: ideologies and world-views that impact institution building (such as humanities disciplines). Never has there been more published historical research than over the past century. Just for Europe, book production has consistently picked up since the fourteenth century; but the past half-century has seen a staggering increase (Roser). Modern mass education, with its mushrooming institution building and faculty, professional intellectuals recruited and evaluated through publication performance, has been producing a daunting output of books. Nineteenth-century historicism, with its post-classical voracity to conquer all periods and places through the lens of history, and postmodernism, with its indulgence in eclectic juxtapositions of historical sound bites, should have made us more history-conscious than ever. Yet, it is astounding how easily current geopolitics can blind us to longer-term historical patterns. While this is less evident in microhistorical studies confined to a single place or culture, which still constitute the bulk of academic output for tenure, this longue-durée amnesia becomes embarrassingly obvious in popular (mis)understanding of premodern worlds. There, geopolitical inequalities and myth-making, based on contemporary hierarchies of economic, political, and cultural power, are typically taken for granted or even exploited for academic fame or financial gain. Take “Sinophobia,” the feverish debates around the recent “rise of China (and Asia).” It is obviously not a rise – but just a come-back, after a brief break, for one of the world’s most persistent transregional hegemonic powers. More dangerous, because less obvious, is the grossly distorting geopolitics of Eurasia. Over the past few decades Eurasia has economically and politically become a “book-end continent,” framed by a mildly declining affluent Western Europe and the vertiginously growing economic powerhouse China.

These maps of the “real world” expose the ideological glass ceilings that remain hidden in scientific geospatial projection. While Europe’s and Japan’s economic power has decreased in relative terms, China has taken a gigantic leap in economic and political terms, as has South Korea. This “book-end continent” has encouraged book-end “East-West” comparisons. The blurb of a new book series on “Chinese-Western Discourse” unabashedly proclaims:
“The ever-increasing interactions between the Chinese and the Western World result in fast-paced global transitions. The series has been created to capture these developments, presenting monographs and collections on the Chinese-Western Discourse in the humanities.” Where is the rest of East, South, and Central Asia? The Middle East? (And a good part of the world otherwise?) What actually is “Chinese-Western Discourse”? Is it the Platinum customers’ airport lounge, where you need the right badge? This drastic reductionism of Eurasian cultural history based on blatant geopolitics is all the more shocking, given that much of “Western” arts and sciences survived through and in dialogue with Arabic translations and scholars and that the lion’s share of the scholarly lexicon of modern East Asian languages originating in Western humanities and “Western discourse” was coined in Japan, not China.

The fetish of “venerable civilizations” and their “splendors” is luckily gradually fading, except in populist propaganda. Over the past decades China historians have shown that the steppe peoples on China’s Northern frontier might have done more for Chinese history than Chinese civilization has done for
these supposed “barbarians.” Moreover, weak, dysfunctional states, obliterated and unclaimed states make for the majority of states in world history. To take just one example, the state of 渤海 (K. Parhae; Ch. Bohai; J. Bokkai) which was formidably powerful on the Eastern edge of Eurasia during the eighth through tenth centuries, falls outside the direct genealogies of extant modern Asian states. Covering parts of today’s North Korea, PRC, and Russia, both Koreans and Chinese subsume it in their broader national lineage. This remains a highly sensitive issue. In an “Atlas of the Real 9th-century World” this state would have featured prominently, dwarfing insignificant marginal Japan. Today this state is forgotten, globally, while being played up unduly as a genealogical token in contemporary East Asian politics. Whatever time period we zoom into, it should be our first priority to imagine the contemporaneous geopolitical landscape, the “Atlas of the Real World” at the time. It will probably look rather different from conventional maps in historical atlases that focus on pure spatial representation and on “civilizational centers” inspired by historical lineages of today’s world.

Parhae shows how historical lineages can be played up for geopolitical purposes, but the inverse case is equally problematic: consider the modern suppression of historical genealogies within East Asia. While Europe, despite and because of its ceaseless internecine wars, has gone through many waves of identity building since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 410, with the European Union as its most recent incarnation, East Asia’s Sinographic Sphere fell apart in the twentieth century: it now consists of modern nation states backed by strongly patriotic ideologies. While we currently have more than 500 Million “Europeans,” at least by passport, there currently are no “East Asians,” but only “Chinese,” “Japanese,” “South Koreans” etc. The European Commission declared 2018 its “European Year of Cultural Heritage” in the midst of the crisis over European values triggered by the massive stream of migrants into the Union, by Brexit, and other malaises. By contrast, awareness of a shared East Asian cultural heritage is largely suppressed by regional nationalisms and fraught with lingering emotions and ambivalence towards a millennia-old history of Chinese influence in the region and the aftermath of modern Japanese imperialism.

Comparing premodern pasts can become its own culture war of sorts, a showdown of civilizations, where the very selection of cultures for comparison already decides the game. A compelling new strategy can be “South-South” comparisons, circumventing the West, as demonstrated by Benjamin Elman’s

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6 See di Cosmo and the work of scholars associated with “New Qing History” such as Pamela Crossley, Peter Perdue, or Mark Elliott.
and Sheldon Pollock’s exemplary, truly collaborative *What China and India Once Were: The Pasts That May Shape the Global Future* (2018). Comparisons of the giants of premodern China and India will increase and promise to illuminate inspiring sets of similarities and incomparabilities, producing concepts and questions for comparison. As a ruse of reason, this will in the end even reshape our understanding of Western cultural history.

### 4 Conclusions: Comparative Global Humanities Now

Debates about how to globalize our disciplines are central to shaping the current transformation of the humanities. In disciplines with strong claims to universals and equally strong anxiety over cultural relativism, like philosophy, they have recently taken an acerbic tone, as we discussed with Bryan van Norden’s multicultural manifesto. But even for disciplines that have recently drastically expanded their global reach, like literary studies and history, many challenges are looming: how can we go beyond (Western postcolonial) presentism, and think through (and learn from) the great diversity of premodern non-Western worlds? How can we not just open our canons to non-Western traditions, but inspire the creation of new concepts and methods through the productive detour of the world’s other (and older) languages and cultures? And how can we keep expanding partial globalizing initiatives, such as “comparative antiquities,” and both older East-West comparisons and more recent South-South comparisons into more fully-fledged global incarnations of our humanities disciplines?

The vibrancy of new global paradigms and the debates they catalyze is heartening to see. And in the midst of fresh debates about cultural and racial diversity, and rampant social inequality in US society, which the COVID-19 pandemic has grossly magnified for us to see, the diversification and globalization of the humanities has become an even more urgent mission for deans, students, policy makers, and the public alike. Realizing the powerful relevance of comparative global humanities as proposed here should give us reason for tempered optimism and purposeful advocacy. Like environmental and medical humanities, global humanities have an immediate role in assessing and addressing some of the most challenging problems of our time. Since the end of the Cold War fundamentalist nationalisms and extremisms (which tend to abuse classical heritage for nationalist or religious propaganda) and rampant cultural and

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See also Pollock, “The Columbia Global Humanities Project” on efforts to assess and address the challenges of the humanities in the Global South.
social inequality (often the effect of the unresolved aftermath of wars, colonization, and mass violence) have notably increased. They have precipitated an unprecedented global migrant crisis, which challenges confidence in our moral convictions and democratic institutions. Postcolonial theorizing, and race, gender, ethnicity studies have been confronting these developments explicitly. But I believe that to create more equal societies in the present we also need to create more equality for other pasts – and learn from all they offer.

Today it is hard to imagine anybody making a sound intellectual case against globalizing our humanities disciplines. I have seen Chinese and American-born-Chinese students complain about universities where professors without any knowledge of Mandarin, let alone expertise in Classical Chinese language and culture, are offering courses in “Chinese philosophy”; and I have heard scholars of Greek philosophy tell me, with sparkling eyes, that “anybody can teach Confucius.” But an ever more diverse student body will not accept this lack of expertise and academic integrity and administrators will have to take measures to protect their institutions’ academic reputation, if philosophy departments themselves do not take appropriate steps to hire experts in Chinese philosophy, or other non-Western thought traditions. There is sheer power in demographic change. It is not the “whether” but the “how” that poses the greatest challenge right now; and the question of where we currently stand. As Haun Saussy recently put it suggestively with his book Are We Comparing Yet? we must ask “Are our disciplines global yet?”

We have seen that this process unfolds quite differently and unevenly across the humanities and that, although some disciplines have come significantly further than others, overall many challenges remain to be tackled. I have proposed three strategies for further leveraging the globalization of the humanities, which I want to restate in closing. First, we need to globalize not just out of disciplinary models, but also area-specific models like Classics. Second, we need to seriously work on our “comparative deficit” and develop comparative methodologies that complement our already rich repertoire of methods considered “comparative,” but actually only applicable to reception- and connection-dependent phenomena. And, third, we should globalize our concepts and methods, not just our canons, and continuously correct our research for implicit metageographical bias favoring the currently powerful regions of the world.

We started by looking at what humanists currently do through humanities centers. I believe that such centers, especially in the US where they are so common, have great potential to contribute to the globalization of our disciplines. As a place where faculty and students of various disciplines and area-specific studies gather they can serve as incubators for the development of transdisci-
plinary forms of historical studies. This obviously requires appropriate funding and faculty devotion. But we should also empower them structurally, and develop creative ways to make them an indispensable part of our research, teaching, and the everyday lives of our communities. They need to be more than a funding source, a nominal clearing house for activities owned anyway by individual departments, or the stage for the occasional lecture series event where specialists invite specialists from their tribe. Based on my experience so far at various institutions it is hard to override these common patterns, but with more demographic, ideological, and intellectual pressures in favor of diversity, we are bound to try much harder in the years to come.

Humanities centers are also a great platform for global networking of faculty outside of official relations between academic institutions, which are typically conducted by administrators. While globalizing our disciplines we also need to globalize and equalize global participation in them – as I suggested above with “classics” working in India, China, or Mexico on their own classical heritage. As we have all had to become veterans in online teaching during the pandemic, guest-lecturing and co-teaching through our global networks has become a realistic possibility. I think that even for students of English literature, it can be life-changing to invite English literature colleagues in New Delhi, Moscow, or Beirut, to teach an online session about how Shakespeare, Joyce, or Kipling look from their local corner of globalizing life, teaching and research (note that personal on-screen encounter is crucial here, as the published work of these colleagues is likely to be more streamlined to Western interests and standards of scholarship; it would be even more revelatory if you are able to discuss English literature with these scholars in their local languages, other than English!). The collateral benefit from such a globally inclusive, tech-enabled education, in terms of subject matter, human interaction, and exposure to local experience is precisely the difference that can make the humanities more substantially “global,” worldly, and relevant to our historical moment.

Comparative Global Humanities hold a great promise to contribute to the transformation of the humanities in the twenty-first century. Though it might at first seem counterintuitive, comparative studies of the planet’s premodern worlds and their link to our present could become a transformative nexus in globalizing our humanities disciplines for our world. Due to their consideration of other places and pasts, Comparative Global Humanities make for a field that is epistemologically humble, ethically responsible, publicly involved, and urgently relevant to dealing with some of the greatest challenges of our times: inequality, fundamentalist nationalisms, and, incidentally also, the “crisis” of the humanities.
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